

Chapter 4

“Look at Me, Boy!”: Carnavalesque, Masks, and Queer Performativity in *Bioshock*

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At first glance, the *Bioshock* series does not seem to be very queer, at least not in terms of its characters. Almost all of its characters appear heteronormative and draw on traditional family structures, including the famous Big Daddies and Little Sisters that play out in different iterations throughout the games. Atop the wonder-cities of Rapture and Columbia sit Andrew Ryan and Zachary Hale Comstock – the powerful patriarchs whose utopian visions must be challenged and thwarted by other presumably straight white men, the player characters of Jack Ryan (*Bioshock*), Subject Delta (*Bioshock 2*),¹ and Booker DeWitt (*Bioshock Infinite*). While some space for queer possibilities opens up as Rapture and Columbia derail into chaos, such potential is never realized; the games remain fixed on straight male protagonists slogging through the wreckage and confronting the evil created by other straight male characters. The result is a surprisingly conventional narrative: heteronormative systems of power, control, and domination remain quite operational, and even those marginalized and excluded by such systems still seek to perpetuate them. The mass of academic and popular discourse that has sprung up around *Bioshock* and its sequels, generative though it has been, has done little to challenge this trend in the games, and instead has focused on the economic, philosophical, social, and ludic structures of the games.²

Yet there are manifestations of queerness in *Bioshock* that remain unexplored. For while the games deal in normative structures, these structures have also fallen apart in the game worlds that the player encounters. This

chapter will focus on some of these deviations from the norm, particularly those related to representations of sexuality, gender, and identity in the first game. Rapture itself has been queered by the time Jack, the player character, reaches it, and the processes that might lead to the city's recreation have instead derailed, leading to further degeneration. This becomes especially clear through the progression (or lack thereof) in the artist-impresario Sander Cohen. Cohen is one of the only LGBTQ characters in *Bioshock*; he rises to stardom in Rapture, and subsequently becomes one of its worst tyrants. As a leader of arts and culture, Cohen takes on special significance as a possible alternative in opposition to the hegemonic business tycoons Andrew Ryan and Frank Fontaine (known throughout most of the first game as Atlas). However such positive possibilities never materialize; instead Cohen reinscribes – for his own benefit – the unjust power structures that led to Rapture's downfall.

The possibility for freedom or transformation is rejected and queered, and the effects of this are written on the masked identities of Cohen and the game's "Splicers" – the citizens of Rapture disfigured by their repeated use of the gene-altering ADAM and its associated plasmids. Cohen and the Splicers constitute complex queer representations that provide a unique opportunity to critically assess recent trends in queer studies, particularly queer game studies. Ultimately their narratives hold out both warning and promise for projects of queer worldbuilding that extend far beyond *Bioshock*, and both are necessary for imagining alternatives through the lens of queer game studies.

This chapter focuses on questions of gender and sexuality in relation to identity, though the games themselves do not necessarily do so. Thus it will be helpful to attend to several questions and definitions before diving into *Bioshock* itself. Sex does not figure prominently in the worlds of *Bioshock* or the representations of its characters, but rather is often shunted to the periphery of the narrative. Sex is often implied, especially in the reproductive origins of characters like Jack (*Bioshock*), Eleanor (*Bioshock 2*), or Elizabeth (*Bioshock Infinite*), but it is never allowed to assume center stage. Sander Cohen's sexual relationships with his male protégés are only found in the implications of their dialogue, and are never actually seen. In every example, including what are otherwise het-

eronormative family relationships, sex and reproduction are forced outside of the player's view and coded as unnatural, creating children that amount to biological weapons (Jack, Eleanor, Elizabeth), or dangerous and abusive relationships (Cohen).³ While these observations reveal absence and an element of queerness in sex and reproduction in the series, they also indicate how gender and sexuality are paradoxically ever-present. Gender and sexuality, like Cohen and the Splicers, are queered and masked in *Bioshock* – simultaneously effaced and also demanding attention. In the act of unmasking them, one finds new insights on the crisis of Rapture and the opportunities it presents. As Gayle Rubin writes in her article “Thinking Sex,” “sexuality should be treated with special respect in times of great social stress,” because it is at such times that the greater freedom or policing of it becomes possible.⁴ The fictional upheaval of Rapture thus provides a rich playground for thinking through the possibilities of queer gender and sexuality, even if it requires careful attention to the “mystified” and “oblique angles” through which they are often represented.⁵

Before proceeding further it is also necessary to provide a working definition of what I mean by the term “queer.” I use the phrase “working definition” quite intentionally, as queer is always what Judith Butler describes as “a site of collective contestation”: a “point of departure” that is “never fully owned.”⁶ Queer must always be that which evades definition, but nevertheless by painting with broad strokes one can get an idea of what it can be and how to deploy it. It is apparent, for example, that queer does not necessarily refer to a particular gender or sexuality, though it often does. Rather, queer can refer to a type of negative position or energy that exists in opposition to established and dominant norms. As Sara Ahmed writes in *Queer Phenomenology*: “To make things queer is certainly to disturb the order of things.”⁷ It is this sense of queer that I utilize when I refer to the queerness of Rapture – queer as the troubling of, the deviation from, and the opposition to normativity. This can certainly take the form of a gay character like Sander Cohen who stands in opposition to heteronormativity, but it is also possible to queer other forms of normativity. Michael Warner acknowledges the same in his introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet*, where he writes: “‘queer’ gets a critical edge by defining itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual, and normal includes

normal business.”⁸ It is in the troubling of “normal business” that one finds *Bioshock*’s queerness, just as much as in the genders and identities of its characters.

Such a configuration of queer makes the concept more broadly applicable, and therein lies its power. A queer reading of *Bioshock* must contend with the familiar, normative social structures, identities, and experiences present in the game, especially if it aims to challenge and upend their common assumptions. This inevitably involves retreading the familiar ground of stereotypes, the everyday experiences of exclusion and marginalization in heteronormative cultures, and the obvious fact that queerness is different, divergent, and strange. Yet, as Eve Sedgwick once wrote, “it’s only by being shameless about risking the obvious that we happen into the vicinity of the transformative.”⁹ Dwelling on the obviously queer elements of *Bioshock* – the fallen city, the use of masks and the closet, the failure of regeneration – presents the opportunity to reflect on the relationship between queerness and normativity, and to see where and how queerness can be truly transformative.

A reconsideration of the familiar is just what queer theory, particularly as applied to game studies, needs right now. Current queer game studies scholarship, such as Adrienne Shaw and Bonnie Ruberg’s recent edited collection *Queer Game Studies* and Shaw’s *LGBTQ Game Archive*, does the crucial work of exploring relationships between queer representation, queer players and communities, and the gaming industry and gaming culture.¹⁰ A critical point in this scholarship is the need for more and better queer representation in games, and the idea that bringing queer players and communities into fuller inclusion in gaming culture and industries will help transform those spaces. While this approach is essential, critical attention to queerness in *Bioshock* suggests that this relationship can work productively in reverse as well, gleaned insights from games for use in queer theory and studies. For example, what can a game, particularly one as enmeshed in normative structures as *Bioshock*, reveal about queerness? What would it look like to use games to play with queerness, and what new definitions, insights, and potentials for queerness could emerge from that play? How can we complicate limited and problematic representations and find in them complex, meaningful contributions to ongoing projects of social justice in gaming cultures and beyond? *Bioshock* only

begins to answer these questions, and pursuing them in other games would provide valuable contributions to queer game studies. The city of Rapture might point the way to a queer rapture, and the emergence or foreclosure of that possibility holds valuable lessons for projects in queer worldbuilding.

Rapture's Queer Carnavalesque

It is New Year's Eve, 1958. The citizens of Rapture have seen a difficult year filled with power struggles between Andrew Ryan and Frank Fontaine, but at last there seems to be the possibility of peace and a return to normalcy. In order to usher in that possibility with the New Year, the people of Rapture turn to all sorts of revelry, including a masquerade ball at the Kashmir restaurant. Over the various noises of the party, Ryan delivers his New Year's speech via Rapture's television, radio, and PA systems:¹¹ "Good evening, my friends. I hope you are enjoying your New Year's Eve celebration; it has been a year of trials for us all. Tonight I wish to remind each of you that Rapture is your city. It was your strength of will that brought you here, and with that strength you shall rebuild. And so, Andrew Ryan offers you a toast: To Rapture, 1959! May it be our finest year."¹² As he speaks of the past year's "trials," Ryan's face becomes drawn and downcast. He holds a glass of wine in his hand, but even as he offers his toast his tone remains official and serious. The party is not for him, but he eagerly awaits the "finest year" that it will engender. Rapture stands poised for a renewal, one that will save its utopian project by putting it back on track.

Rapture's New Year's festivities are a special time when the normal rules and procedures of the city are set aside, and when its citizens come together to celebrate the possibilities of the coming year. In contrast to Rapture's normally hierarchical society, the citizens of Rapture are supposedly temporarily equal; Ryan claims, "Rapture is *your* city," and that 1959 will be "*our* finest year" (emphases mine). The great, including Sander Cohen, mingle with the small at the masquerade at Kashmir restaurant, as heard in the audio recording of the event by Rapture Radio.¹³ The suspension of the usual social order signals that Rapture's New Year's celebrations function as a form of Bakhtin's carnivalesque. Mikhail Bakhtin

describes carnival as a special, specific time of remaking and rejuvenating the existing order through revelry: “it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world’s revival and renewal, in which all take part.”¹⁴ The carnivalesque upsets the normal order of things and makes everyone equal for a short time, which allows for a release of social tension that also brings people together, reestablishing a sense of community that persists even when the normal rules resume.¹⁵ As Bakhtin defines it, the carnivalesque originally refers to medieval and Renaissance festivals, though it has been taken up to discuss more recent phenomena as well, such as in Mandy Merck’s work that highlights the “carnavalesque celebrations of Gay Pride.”¹⁶

While the upending of the social order would seem to open up on new possibilities for Rapture, carnival is always a limited opportunity that forecloses on itself when the festivities end. In other words, the carnivalesque is always bound to the normative structures it upends: it “denies, but it revives and renews at the same time.”¹⁷ Even within itself, the carnivalesque is limited to its own topsy-turvy rules of opposition. As Neil Ravenscroft and Paul Gilchrist remark in their article on the modern carnivalesque, “the licence to transgress is a bounded licence; it comes with a code of conduct that is every bit as ordered as people’s normal lives.”¹⁸ This same order is present in the ritual and cyclical nature of carnivalesque celebrations as well, such as the annual birth of a New Year whereby time itself is renewed and repeated. As Bakhtin writes, carnival is “always essentially related to time, either to the recurrence of an event in the natural (cosmic) cycle, or to biological or historic timeliness.”¹⁹ Carnavalesque is not just one event, but a series of repeated events that ensure the continuation of a social system. Rapture is undergoing this process as it leaves the old year behind, and looks forward to 1959 as “our finest year.” The possibilities of Rapture’s New Year carnivalesque are temporary and controlled, and they always have an order defined by a relationship to normal life.

Thus the carnivalesque is oriented toward the established order it will eventually return to. In Rapture, this order is Ryan’s society that is allegedly free from the regulations of government, religion, or morality. New Year’s Eve in 1958 marks a specific time of celebration that stands in stark contrast to the trials of the rest of the year, trials created in large

part by Ryan and his attempts to maintain control in the purported free market of Rapture. At the very beginning of the first *Bioshock* game, Ryan presents Rapture as “a city where the artist would not fear the censor, where the scientist would not be bound by petty morality, where the great would not be constrained by the small.”²⁰ Ryan’s attempts to regulate and subdue Fontaine can easily be seen as hypocrisy in Ryan’s libertarian position, but such an interpretation misses how Ryan’s actions stem from an inherent contradiction in Objectivist thought. How can the free market possibly remain free when it is founded in the belief that one should always act in self-interest? Why should that self-interest not include establishing tyrannical control? Thus construed, Ryan’s suppression of Fontaine is a natural outcome of the normative systems that underpin life in Rapture, and it is those systems that Ryan hopes will regenerate through the Rapture’s carnivalesque.

Yet there are hints that Rapture’s carnivalesque may not be what it appears, and that it may not lead where it should. In the Kashmir restaurant, the ruins of which are one of the first areas the player encounters in *Bioshock*, the player can discover the audio diary of Diane McClintock, Andrew Ryan’s girlfriend prior to the fall of Rapture. The diary is aptly titled “New Year’s Eve Alone,” and reveals McClintock’s feelings on attending the celebrations alone after being blown off by Ryan yet again: “Another New Year’s, another night alone ... Imagine my surprise.”²¹ Even though she is surrounded by the carnivalesque of the New Year, McClintock cannot bring herself to actively participate in the festivities. She sits alone and morose, a sombre reminder that Ryan and the Rapture he embodies can be exclusive and abusive. In McClintock’s audio diary, the player encounters the idea that perhaps Rapture should not be renewed – perhaps a successful carnivalesque in the New Year of 1959 is not so desirable after all. This possibility becomes a reality as the audio diary is interrupted with sounds of explosions and screaming, and McClintock is left disoriented, desperately trailing off: “What ... what happened ... I’m bleeding ... oh, God ... what’s happening.”²² The moment captured in McClintock’s audio diary radically reconfigures Rapture’s carnivalesque; the possibility of renewal is shattered and a new, darker horizon appears. Such a reorientation is disorienting; as Ahmed describes, “moments of disorientation are vital. They are bodily experiences that throw the world

up, or throw the body from its ground ... Such a feeling of shattering, or of being shattered, might persist and become a crisis.”²³ As the player sees in the ruins of Kashmir, Rapture’s disorientation does indeed engender a prolonged crisis. The city enters a state of indeterminate stasis, wherein all progress, functions, and even time are suspended and break down. To borrow from Jordan Youngblood’s chapter in this collection, “chrononormativity” fails in the city, seemingly in perpetuity. Rapture’s queer carnivalesque has begun.

The Rapture the player encounters throughout *Bioshock* and *Bioshock 2* is a city that has veered off course, and that veering constitutes the failure of the carnivalesque. Yet failure can be generative; indeed failure is itself the domain of the queer, as Jack Halberstam argues in *The Queer Art of Failure*. To be queer often means to deviate and fail by normative standards, but this is a crucial aspect of queer’s critical and creative power. Failure opens up alternative possibilities; it “presents an opportunity rather than a dead end.”²⁴ So while Rapture’s carnivalesque has failed to renew the city as it was, it has succeeded in another sense by creating the potential for a different Rapture to take its place. In other words, Rapture’s carnivalesque has been queered. Importantly, this queer carnivalesque remains a continuing process, rather than being merely a queer moment that opens up on more or different normativity. Rapture’s civil war that follows the New Year demonstrates this, showing how the moment experienced by McClintock was the beginning of an ongoing experience, rather than an isolated event. Thus it may be apt to acknowledge, as Derritt Mason does in his brief critique of Halberstam, that the queer is a process of imperfection rather than a moment of failure.²⁵ In any case, the queer carnivalesque of Rapture begins with the first moments of 1959, and the player is left to explore its effects.

Bakhtin theorized that the carnivalesque operated through a series of “ritual spectacles” that the people actively participated in as a type of play or performance.²⁶ The New Year’s celebrations at the Kashmir Restaurant took the form of a masquerade, and the primary form of the spectacle in Rapture’s queer carnivalesque is the mask. One man looms large over Rapture’s carnivalesque and its spectacles: Sander Cohen, the leader of the city’s arts and culture. Cohen designed the masks of Rapture and has a personal connection to them, and he provides a unique lens for decon-

structing their meaning and function. Cohen is also one of the only LGBTQ characters in the *Bioshock* series, and unsurprisingly features prominently in the queer carnivalesque of the first game. Cohen thus becomes a conductor and a master of ceremonies for this chapter's exploration of Rapture's queer potential.

The Queer Masks of Sander Cohen

Sander Cohen is a prominent figure in Rapture's social elite, controlling the arts and culture of the city well before the carnivalesque of New Year's Eve 1958 and well after the beginning of its queer carnivalesque in 1959. In a drawing that the player encounters in the first *Bioshock* game, titled "Rapture's Best and Brightest – 1952," Cohen takes his place alongside other significant characters in both Rapture and the game's narrative, including Andrew Ryan, Dr Yi Suchong, and Dr Brigid Tenenbaum. Cohen's ascension to the top of Rapture's social ladder would seem to be evidence for the city's promise of greater freedom and acceptance. By comparison, LGBTQ persons in the surface world at this time faced intense discrimination and persecution, often becoming targets of government sanctions, investigations, and purges.²⁷

Yet even in Rapture, Cohen chooses not to be an openly gay man. Cohen's sexuality is never even explicitly stated in the games, though it is heavily implied that he had sexual relationships with his male protégés through statements they make when Cohen sends the player to murder them. For example, Silas Cobb remarks in an audio diary "I used to love you [referring to Cohen]"; Martin Finnegan calls Cohen an "old fruit"; and Hector Rodriguez comments on "the things that man had me do."²⁸ The decision to keep these relationships in the shadows could be just a personal choice on Cohen's part, but in the deceptive worlds of *Bioshock* things are rarely that simple. Rather, Cohen's decision to mask his sexuality is part of a calculated performance that enables his rise through Rapture's ranks. Cohen is not publicly gay because being so would open him up to slander and, worse yet, endanger his value to Andrew Ryan.

Alongside the subtle jabs at his sexuality, Cohen is criticized by other characters for a lack of talent or free expression in his work. Cohen's art is frequently blatant propaganda for Ryan's vision of Rapture, which



Figure 4.1 Sander Cohen (second from the left) depicted with other prominent figures in Rapture's various industries and social circles. (Cropped screenshot taken from *Bioshock*, © 2k Games, 2007. *BioShock* Wiki. http://bioshock.wikia.com/wiki/Rapture?file=BioShock2_2010-02-27_17-38-29-84.png)

leads his rival Anna Culpepper to label him “Ryan’s Songbird.” A particularly egregious example is the anthem “Rise, Rapture, Rise,” a song Cohen penned in support of Ryan’s ideals that even borrows Ryan’s language of “parasites” that live on the surface and leech off others. Lyrics include: “Oh rise, Rapture, rise! To help us crush Parasites despised.”²⁹ In addition to aligning Cohen with Ryan, the words of the song mirror exactly what such propaganda allows Cohen to do – i.e., Cohen rises in rank by performing the dominant philosophy and language of power in Rapture. Cohen’s art thus becomes a figurative mask that endears him to the existing power structure and opens opportunities for him within it.

The act of masking is present even in Cohen’s work outside of propaganda. Cohen designs the masks used in the New Year’s masquerade celebration, and the same masks are seen in many other portions of the games both before and after the fall of Rapture (such as in *Bioshock Infinite: Burial at Sea*, or on the Splicers throughout *Bioshock* and *Bioshock 2*). Cohen’s masks are physical representations of his position within



Figure 4.2 In-game poster for Rapture's New Year's masquerade. (Cropped screenshot taken from *BioShock*, © 2k Games, 2007. *BioShock* Wiki. http://bioshock.wikia.com/wiki/File:Masquerade_poster.jpg)

Rapture. They cover up, they hide, and they perform – all while granting a protected vantage point to the eyes behind them. At the same time, however, the eyes become trapped behind the mask. Both realities seem present in the masquerade poster (see Figure 4.2), and behind the mask it is impossible to tell if the eyes are leering or fearful. While the bunny mask

depicted is one of several varieties present in Rapture's carnivalesque (others including the butterfly, the bird, etc.), it takes on special significance for Cohen in his poem "The Wild Bunny": "I want to take the ears off, but I can't ... It's my curse! It's my fucking curse! ... Please! Take them off! Please!"³⁰ The desperate, agonized cries of the poem reflect the costs of Cohen's masks, and especially the feeling of being trapped by them. The poem also establishes a potential parallel between the mask and Cohen's sexuality, itself an unchangeable and binding part of his existence.

Masks in Cohen's art are simultaneously (and paradoxically) safety and opportunity on the one hand, and restriction and imprisonment on the other. In this way they take on similar meaning to queer discourse surrounding being "in the closet" – choosing to hide or not disclose one's sexuality. The closet is often invoked as a symbol of the oppression and discrimination inherent in heteronormative culture, and its very existence is predicated on a need to hide or withhold for fear of reprisal. Yet the closet is also the same safety of the mask, and its otherness provides a crucial difference and distance for those who use it. As Ahmed notes, "we could consider 'the closet' itself as an orientation device, a way of inhabiting the world or of being at home in the world."³¹ In this way Cohen's masks are his admittedly tortured way of surviving in and making his way through Rapture. José Esteban Muñoz uses the term "disidentification" to describe this process of surviving normative culture, and it proves an especially apt word for the masking that Cohen performs.³² Cohen survives by disidentifying himself, by effacing himself literally and figuratively through the object of the mask. Beyond a personal, individual tactic, Cohen's masks take on profoundly social meaning when they are placed (or forced) onto others as part of Rapture's carnivalesque. As the people of Rapture don their masks, the mask becomes a marker of a collective identity defined by the protections and limitations of hiding oneself in favour of normative social ideals (such as beauty, wealth, power, etc.). Yet the collective identity of the mask affords neither freedom nor fulfillment, instead sweeping the wearer up into the destructive cycle of the queer carnivalesque.

As a form of ritual spectacle, the act of masking in Cohen's art has the curious effect of both placing him in the public spotlight and effacing who

he really is. Alongside the protection and danger that the mask offers, this reveals how the mask exists in a liminal space that is both public and private, and yet neither of these things as well. Here again the mask parallels Cohen's identity as a gay man, an identity that Warner writes has "neither privacy *nor* publicness, in these normative senses of the terms."³³ The tension between public and private normativity results in queer persons being robbed of both spheres – normativity demands that their private be made public, and that their public be shunted to the private. This effects a type of invisibility that finds its perfect representation in the mask, a device that enables queer survival while trapping its wearers in ignorable minority positions. As Iain Morland and Annabelle Willox say in their introduction to *Queer Theory*, "the minority status of 'queer' is coterminous with its invisibility."³⁴ The mask thus performs Cohen's public invisibility in Rapture, and forms part of the illusion that is shattered in the queer carnivalesque of 1959.

Cohen's Fort Frolic: Performing the Queer Carnavalesque

The mask is not only part of the carnivalesque that remakes Rapture, but also crucial to how Cohen makes and remakes himself in relation to the city's normative structures. The mask takes on new meaning after the fall of Rapture and the queering of its carnivalesque. In 1959 Rapture descended into civil war, the warring factions headed by Andrew Ryan and Frank Fontaine, and it is the ruins left after this war that the player explores in *Bioshock* and *Bioshock 2*. One might expect that the production of arts and culture would have ceased during Rapture's civil war, but Cohen continues to create a twisted form of art in seclusion at Fort Frolic, his base of operations over which he has complete control. Fort Frolic is itself a carnival: a centre for shopping, gambling, strip clubs, and the fine arts for all of Rapture. Prior to New Year's 1959 these activities were integral to the carnivalesque that kept Rapture running smoothly, but during and after the civil war Cohen closed the area to outsiders. Fort Frolic became an isolated carnival under Cohen's direct influence, a microcosm of Rapture's general degradation. As a result, Fort Frolic becomes the epitome of the queer carnivalesque that affects the entire city.

Cohen maintains Fort Frolic as a part of the city in opposition to the normative structures represented in Andrew Ryan and Frank Fontaine. This opposition becomes especially apparent when the player enters Fort Frolic for the first time, and Cohen disrupts the player's radio communication with both Ryan and Atlas. As he does so, Cohen remarks, "Ah, that's better ... Atlas, Ryan, Atlas, Ryan, duh duh duh duh dudg ... Time was you could get something decent on the radio ... so say goodbye to those two blowhards, and hello to an evening with Sander Cohen!" Cohen forgoes his allegiance to either of the two "blowhards," and instead invites the player (after a test of course) into Fort Frolic. In rejecting Ryan and Atlas, Cohen establishes his domain – a separate space that is best understood as what Warner calls a "counterpublic." Warner describes a counterpublic as a public that exists in "tension with a larger public" and "maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status."³⁵ In Warner's theorization, counterpublics are primarily social constructs created through the circulation of discourse, but the counterpublics of *Bioshock* highlight how they are always tied to particular peoples and the spaces they inhabit. Cohen's Fort Frolic is a prime example of this – Cohen's speech sets it apart rhetorically and discursively, but there are also physical barriers, and distance, separating Fort Frolic from Ryan and Atlas's Rapture. In both word and space, Fort Frolic is a counterpublic that resists the power structures present in the rest of Rapture, while at the same time acknowledging the existence of those structures.

As a counterpublic, Fort Frolic and the queer carnivalesque it contains have the potential to upend existing structures in Rapture and create something new in their place. As Warner notes, a counterpublic "often has the aim of transformation."³⁶ Yet this is not the case with Cohen or Fort Frolic. Cohen controls Fort Frolic in much the same way Ryan controls the rest of Rapture, and he forces the player to assist him in creating his "masterpiece," the Quadtych (see Figure 4.3). Cohen's Quadtych consists of seven victims (all male) whom Cohen has murdered and encased in plaster, and the player completes it by killing four of Cohen's former disciples and adding photographs of their corpses to the display. Rather than using his counterpublic to liberate himself and those around him from the violence and oppression of Rapture's normative structures, Cohen continues to perform a queer carnivalesque that simply regenerates that



Figure 4.3 Cohen's Quadtych, sans photographs. (Screenshot taken from *Bioshock*, © 2k Games, 2007. *BioShock* Wiki. http://bioshock.wikia.com/wiki/File:Cohen%27s_Quadtych.png)

violence and oppression. In other words, Cohen internalizes the very systems that trapped and limited him in Rapture, and violently enacts their worst possibilities on others in Fort Frolic. In so doing, Cohen's character feeds into a troubling trend in the representation of gay men in media: "the present and absent character of death continually dances in the shadows, the corners, and the alleys of the gay male narrative."³⁷ *Bioshock* presents an unfortunate twist in this narrative – death continually haunts Cohen because he visits it on others.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Cohen maintains the use of the mask in the ongoing queer carnivalesque. After the player completes his Quadtych, Cohen appears to marvel at his work and descends the main stairs of Fort Frolic wearing a golden bunny mask (unlike the white ones worn by the Splicers). Halfway down the stairs Cohen unmask himself, saying: "Let me see it!" Cohen's exclamation is easy to miss and seems trivial at first glance, but when placed in the context of masking and the carnivalesque it takes on special significance as a potential act of literal and figurative revelation – perhaps, at last, the real Cohen will emerge. All Cohen reveals,

however, is another mask: he has painted his face, and his performance continues (see Figure 4.4). In effect, this performance reveals that there is no “real” Sander Cohen, only the performance. All that Cohen is has been subsumed into his work, his masks, and the queer carnivalesque.

While Cohen’s masks always embody a type of physical and literal performance, another type of performative emerges through the player’s interactions with him. Cohen’s statements often come in the form of commands, such as the “Let me see it!” exclamation. These commands demand response and reaction, and allow Cohen to simultaneously act on the world around him and enact his will and sense of self. They are, in other words, a performance of identity, and constitute what Judith Butler describes as a linguistic performative act: “Performative acts are forms of authoritative speech: most performatives, for instance, are statements which, in the uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power.”³⁸ Cohen’s commanding language is performative in the sense that his speech acts organize his sense of reality and identity: they establish him as an authoritative figure, and they exert influence on others and his surroundings. His imperatives are performances of power that demand attention and recognition, and they join with the performance of the mask to create a uniquely queer performativity. This becomes clear in his exclamations when attacking the player, particularly “Look at me, boy!,” and, strangely, “Don’t look at me!” The use of two contrary performatives in the same context parallels the dual function of the mask as both performance and effacement of identity. Cohen’s demand for recognition with “Look at me, boy!” demonstrates a need for an audience to bring meaning to his performance. It is what Claire Colebrook calls a type of “self-giving,” a way of constituting his sense of self through the acknowledgment of others.³⁹ On the other hand, the performative “Don’t look at me!” reveals a fear of that same recognition, and a corresponding desire to hide from the prying gaze of the other. Cohen’s performance exists in the queer tension between these two impulses, and constantly risks erupting into paroxysms of paranoia and physical violence. This same tension plays out in Cohen’s relationship to time, as Youngblood notes in the next chapter. Cohen exists in the diverting space of Fort Frolic that is outside of chrononormativity, yet he remains utterly fixated on time and rhythm (and even becomes violent when that rhythm is thrown off).



Figure 4.4 Sander Cohen, “unmasked.” (Screenshot taken from *Bioshock*, © 2k Games, 2007. *BioShock* Wiki, http://bioshock.wikia.com/wiki/Sander_Cohen?file=Sander-cohen.jpg)

The particular queer performativity described here, like the queer carnivalesque it is a part of, engenders a downward spiral that leads Cohen into apparent madness. Beyond attacking his work, numerous characters label Cohen a madman, and the violence he enacts on others seems to provide evidence for their claims. For example, Atlas refers to Cohen as “a real lunatic, a dyed-in-the-wool psychopath,” and Cohen’s student Fitzpatrick calls him a “sick fuck” immediately before Cohen murders him. The association of madness or mental illness with Cohen’s character seems to fall into a troubled narrative of pathologizing and criminalizing queer persons,⁴⁹ but there is more at work here. Cohen lives in perpetual fear

of his “fucking doubters,” the invasive and critical gaze of those who do not understand or appreciate him. Because he also constitutes his sense of self through the recognition of others (others who are always potential “doubters”), this situates him in what Butler calls “the peculiar form of imagining against oneself which is paranoia.”⁴¹ To conclude that Cohen is simply mad is to ignore the context and reasoning for why he acts the way he does. The social and political systems of Rapture demanded Cohen’s masks, and whatever possibilities for freedom and transformation those masks offered him were always already foreclosed upon by the same systems. The masks allowed Cohen to play in a game he could not win, and when Rapture fell, the mask – along with all of its figurative and physical violence – was all that was left to him.

Even if one accepts that Sander Cohen is mad, however, there remains a queer potential in his character and the queer carnivalesque. To return to Bakhtin, “madness is a gay parody of official reason, of the narrow seriousness of official ‘truth.’”⁴² Madness is a mockery of established thought, and as such it can reveal the limitations of the official, the traditional, and the normative, potentially opening the way to something other than these. Of course Bakhtin refers to madness in a somewhat trivial sense – it is a temporary state of being, a topsy-turvy frenzy that exists as part of the carnivalesque. The portrayal of Cohen as a murderous “psychopath” draws on a much more pernicious history, wherein madness is distinguished from reason and the two are, in the words of Foucault, “henceforth eternal, deaf to all exchange, and as though dead to one another.”⁴³ By defining Cohen as a madman, the other characters render him as an inscrutable, monstrous other – a thing to be cast out and looked down upon in order to prop up their own senses of rational normativity. While this is undoubtedly a further violence against Cohen (more of the “fucking doubters” he both needs and despises), it still holds a queer potential to challenge the status quo of reason and common sense, and to replace these stagnant values with more transformative thinking. Cohen himself does not seize this critical power, but it remains present for the player and the critic to recover and make use of.

Splicers and the Queering of Identity

While Fort Frolic epitomizes the queer carnivalesque and Cohen's particular counterpublic, the effects of these processes are felt throughout the rest of Rapture. As Grant Travinor describes, death and decay have spread throughout the city that the player is exploring, and the failure of the city's promise is even written on the bodies of its Splicer inhabitants: "the sea is slowly but surely retaking Rapture, while its citizens have become corrupted by the arts and sciences the city was built upon ... they now creep through Rapture's darkened halls bemoaning their lost humanity."⁴⁴ Crucially, the corruption by the arts that Travinor mentions is engendered by Sander Cohen, and represents an extension of his character onto the rest of Rapture. The Splicers are often found wearing the same masks that Cohen designed for the New Year's masquerade – not necessarily out of any loyalty to Cohen himself, but rather because they, like Cohen, find themselves in need of masks. These masks mark the transformation of Rapture's people, one that sweeps them up in the queer carnivalesque.

Whereas Cohen wears his masks for power and protection, the Splicers wear them out of a sense of shame. The masks cover the grotesque deformities caused by repeated abuse of the gene-altering ADAM substance, though they do little to veil the violence and dilapidation that rules over the citizens of fallen Rapture (see Figure 4.5). The Splicers' clothes and masks are tattered and covered in blood yet they still cling to them to cover up their perceived ugliness, which stands in contrast to the ideals of beauty and perfection that Rapture once embodied. Ironically the same objects meant to cover shame also perpetuate it – clothes and masks serve as constant reminders of what once was, for both player and Splicer. This impulse of shame is similar to that found in queer subjectivities, as it marks (and is even encouraged by) encounters with normativity. One of the projects of queer theory is to radically transform and repurpose this shame; as Sally Munt writes, "shame produces shamed subjectivities, however it is an aspect of the dynamism of shame that it also can produce a reactive, new self to form that has a liberatory energy."⁴⁵ As with the potential of Sander Cohen and the queer carnivalesque, however, the potential "liberatory energy" of shame is not realized in the Splicers. Rather than using shame to build anew and differently, the Splicers dwell in their



Figure 4.5 A "Leadhead" Splicer. (Cropped screenshot taken from *Bioshock*, © 2k Games, 2007. *BioShock* Wiki. http://bioshock.wikia.com/wiki/File:Leadhead_Splicer.png)

shame, allowing it to control them. This sense of shame propels the Slicers to enact violence on others. That carnage is partly necessitated by the game itself, as violent Splicers are used as common challenges for the player. Yet this observation works in tandem with the narrative significance of the Splicers' shame: both gameplay requirements and shame lock the

Splicers in a cycle of addiction and violence. *Bioshock* presents potentials, but the story and gameplay conditions of its world dictate that those same potentials are always foreclosed.

Just as Cohen's masks exemplify the ritual spectacle of the carnivalesque, the Splicers' bodies and the shame they feel in them form a version of Bakhtin's grotesque. Bakhtin describes the grotesque as a particular aesthetic present in carnival; in "grotesque realism," Bakhtin says, "the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people."⁴⁶ As part of the queer carnivalesque, however, Rapture's Splicers represent an inversion of Bakhtin's description. The "bodily element" of Splicers is certainly not positive, but rather represents a negative potential that becomes the only potential for Rapture. In Bruce Howard Bayley's work on Bakhtin and queer performance, he comments on how grotesque bodies present "the contrast of opposites,"⁴⁷ and this is readily observable in the portrayal of Splicers. The bloodied and tattered clothing that Splicers wear contrasts with the elegance of their masks, and its civilian nature tells of an ordinary, peaceful past that stands in stark opposition to their present violence, visualized in blood and weaponry. Even in their bodies, Splicers are a queer amalgam of the people they once were and the monstrous others they have become. The grotesque of the Splicers offers no resolution to these contrasts, nor does it produce anything but further deterioration as part of Rapture's queer carnivalesque. Splicers simply exist in these oppositions, going nowhere and presenting no hope of redemption.⁴⁸

The primary effect of the queer carnivalesque and its masks on the Splicers is already hinted at in their grotesque nature. By becoming the grotesque and assuming their masks, Splicers take on a collective identity that effaces their individual identities. They no longer have their own names and histories, and instead these things are subsumed in the general identity of the Splicer. In effect this is a queering of identity – a destabilizing of the individual "that severs the notion of identity from any stable reference points."⁴⁹ Without the usual reference points that denote the normative individual, all that remains is the mask that marks a shared shame and identity as Splicer. This shared identity, similar to Cohen's own use of the mask, simultaneously effaces the Splicers as individuals while also

demanding attention through confrontation with the player. The experience of this contradiction is largely forced onto the Splicers by the normative structures of Rapture (including Rapture's existence as game space), and is similar to what Warner describes in queer counterpublics as "the incoherence of the experience that domination creates, an experience that often feels more like invisibility than like the kind of privacy you value."⁵⁰ Splicers are paradoxically an ever-present invisibility in the games, the queer spectre of the individual knowable only by its group identity. The function of the Splicers as game mechanic partially contributes to this, but there is further narrative significance to Splicers as effects of and participants in Rapture's queer carnivalesque.

Through this interpretation of the Splicers, one begins to grasp the negative potentials of a queer carnivalesque that reinscribes normative power structures. Rather than seizing the opportunity to queer individual identity into new generative forms, Cohen and the Splicers who perform the queer carnivalesque forgo that critical power in favour of enacting further violence and destruction. Their Rapture is no true rapture; instead it becomes mired in the same modes of oppressive normativity that created their crises to begin with.

Queer Warnings, Queer Promises

What, ultimately, does one learn from Rapture's queer carnivalesque, and from Sander Cohen? What insights does *Bioshock* hold for the queer? If this exploration has yielded anything, it is that there are no easy, untroubled answers to these questions. Yet I argue that *Bioshock* offers both warnings and promises for projects in queer theory and queer worldmaking.

The first warning *Bioshock* offers (and perhaps most obvious) is that LGBTQ representations in games matter, especially because they depict significant ways of simply being and performing queer identities. Characters like Sander Cohen may represent queer identity to heteronormative players, so it is crucial to critically engage with the problems, limitations, and potentials of those representations.⁵¹ Such engagement must not come just through the roles of the player or the critic, who can only critique after the portrayal has already been rendered for the public. Rather, designers and developers must maintain an awareness of the effects that

their games have on the people they represent, and include the perspectives of those peoples in the design process. There are potential problems with large, AAA teams lead by straight male auteurs like Ken Levine portraying a gay man like Sander Cohen in *Bioshock*, but including LGBTQ persons in the design of their own representation can help curtail those problems. There are also good reasons to be optimistic about increasing LGBTQ representation, as Jane Campbell and Theresa Carilli are in their introduction to *Queer Media Images*: “We believe that the LGBT community is in the formative process of constructing a media identity – one that breaks away from being either a tragic oddity or a predator. This identity will shape future media depictions of the LGBT community, eventually ensuring visibility and authenticity.”⁵² Such potentials only come through close attention and the difficult work of unmasking the implications of LGBTQ portrayals in media, including games. In particular, players could perceive *Bioshock*’s Sander Cohen as representing and supporting a negative stereotype of queer persons – that we are neurotic, prone to violence, or manipulative of others. As this chapter has demonstrated, Cohen’s portrayal is significantly more complex than this, but it is only through close analysis of his character that such complexity (and its potentials) emerges.

An additional warning, more specific to the *Bioshock* games, is to beware the rhetoric of utopia that so easily sneaks into narratives of progress and calls for change. *Bioshock* repeatedly presents the potentials of utopia to its players in the forms of cities such as Rapture and Columbia, and the games seem to offer the opportunity of choosing utopia just as Andrew Ryan “chose” Rapture. Yet these potentials and opportunities are quickly and repeatedly foreclosed upon, and “the game ultimately offers only an illusion of choice.”⁵³ This holds true for the queer carnivalesque in Rapture – its spectacles and performances hold out the possibility of rejecting oppressive normative structures and replacing them with inclusive and transformative ones, but that possibility is never realized. Instead the queer carnivalesque of *Bioshock* reenacts the same failures repeatedly, and regenerates normative power structures in an endless, negative cycle of domination and destruction. The other games in the series, *Bioshock 2* and *Bioshock Infinite*, are much the same. In *Bioshock 2* the queer carnivalesque of Rapture has continued to regenerate the cycles of violence, shame, and oppression from the first game, and the social utopia offered

by Sofia Lamb is little more than a thin veneer over Andrew Ryan's abuses of power. Columbia in *Bioshock Infinite* offers yet another utopia built on nationalism and religion, but its festival at the beginning of the game quickly engenders another version of the queer carnivalesque as the city's oppressive power structures unravel and are remade (notably along racial lines). Queer theorists often use the concept of queer in a similarly utopic fashion, "in the hope of creating alternatives to expand our spheres of action."⁵⁴ But what assumptions are built into this use of queer?

The case of the fictional Sander Cohen and the queer carnivalesque over which he presides is effectively an experiment that demonstrates two related things: 1) that queer identities are perfectly capable of reifying unjust and exploitative systems, and 2) that the mere claiming or even performing of anti-normativity is no guarantee of social change and transformation. Anti-normativity, queerness, and failure can be transformative and generative, but they are not inherently so. It is time to be more critical of how we understand and use queer in narratives of progress, and to take seriously the idea that queer itself could be queered – that queer could fail and *not* open up on something different. Halberstam seems to recognize this potential in a recent article on Bersani's work: "Bersani's version of betrayal unmakes the queer project itself and demands that we let it collapse under the weight of its own contradictions."⁵⁵ At the very least, Rapture and Sander Cohen provide a critical moment to reconsider and reorient projects of queer world-making, and warn us not to internalize and reenact oppressive normative structures.

Yet there are still promises in the queer, just as there is evasive promise in the carnivalesque of cities in the depths of the ocean or riding on the clouds. Even as Rapture's queer carnivalesque spirals downward, it reminds how failure creates spaces for new attempts, new leaders, and new ideas. As Halberstam writes in *The Queer Art of Failure*, perhaps queer always retains promise in "failing well, failing often, and learning, in the words of Samuel Beckett, how to fail better."⁵⁶ Rapture and its inhabitants fail in some of the worst ways possible, but seeing how they do so can show us how "fail better."

Ultimately, the queer lessons of *Bioshock* are taught indirectly, through negation and failure. The games provide blueprints of what not to do. And perhaps this is the way the queer learns best. As Elizabeth Freeman

writes on queer theory: “Now I think the point [of queer theory] may be to trail behind actually existing social possibilities: to be interested in the tail end of things, willing to be bathed in the fading light of whatever has been declared useless.”⁵⁷ The tasks of thinking and making queer possibilities are as much acts of salvage as they are acts of upending and transformation,⁵⁸ and *Bioshock* provides a rich salvage yard to sift through. What we find – concepts like queer carnivalesques, masks, performativities, etc. – may seem useless at first. In myriad ways these concepts have failed, and thus ended up on the scrap heap. Yet it is this very failure that makes them queer, and opens the possibility of using them in different, more generative ways. It is up to us to seize that possibility, and to ever begin again.

NOTES

- 1 Admittedly this narrative takes a different turn in *Bioshock 2*, where Subject Delta fights against Sofia Lamb. Still, Lamb seizes control of Rapture only in Ryan’s absence, and she remains a largely normative (though notably single) mother figure for her daughter and cult following (see Vanderhoef and Payne’s chapter in this collection).
- 2 Numerous bloggers and journalists have commented on gender more generally in the games, especially on female characters such as Sofia Lamb, Eleanor, and Elizabeth, often noting their limited roles in relation to the male protagonists. Commentary on queer characters has been relatively limited, but see Leigh Alexander’s column for GameSetWatch, or VorpaiBunny’s post for GayGamer.net. Also see Jordan Youngblood’s chapter on family and reproduction in this collection.
- 3 In a notorious scene in *Bioshock 2*, a male Splicer appears to rape a female Splicer. It is one of the only sex acts actually portrayed in the games, and is clearly coded as heinous and violent.
- 4 Rubin, “Thinking Sex,” 138.
- 5 Ibid., 168.
- 6 Butler, “Critically Queer,” 19.
- 7 Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 161.
- 8 Warner, “Introduction,” xxvi.
- 9 Sedgwick, “Axiomatic,” 81.
- 10 Ruberg and Shaw, *Queer Game Studies*. Shaw, *LGBTQ Video Game Archive*.

- 11 The speech is present in *Bioshock 2* during the introductory sequence that is a flashback to Subject Delta and Eleanor on that evening. It also featured in the audio recordings of Rapture Radio used as promotional material for the game. A transcript and video of the full speech can be found at http://Bioshock.wikia.com/wiki/Andrew_Ryan.
- 12 “Andrew Ryan.”
- 13 “Rapture Radio.”
- 14 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 7.
- 15 Ibid., 10.
- 16 Merck, “Afterword,” 187.
- 17 Ibid., 11.
- 18 Ravenscroft and Gilchrist, “Spaces of Transgression: Governance, Discipline and Reworking the Carnavalesque,” 40.
- 19 Ibid., 9.
- 20 “Andrew Ryan.”
- 21 “New Year’s Eve Alone.”
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 157.
- 24 Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 96.
- 25 Mason, “The Queer Art of Imperfection,” 14.
- 26 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 5.
- 27 Rubin, “Thinking Sex,” 140.
- 28 Transcripts of these statements can be found through the “Sander Cohen” page of the *Bioshock* Wiki. It has also been confirmed in developer interviews that Cohen is a gay man, and an excellent post covering one such interview by user VorpallBunny was available at GayGamer.net titled “Queer Characters: *Bioshock*.”
- 29 “Rise, Rapture, Rise.”
- 30 “The Wild Bunny.” See also VorpallBunny.
- 31 Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 175.
- 32 Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, 4.
- 33 Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 53.
- 34 Morland and Willox, “Introduction,” 3.
- 35 Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 56.
- 36 Ibid., 62.

- 37 Goltz, *Queer Temporalities in Gay Male Representation: Tragedy, Normativity, and Futurity*, 55.
- 38 Butler, "Critically Queer," 17.
- 39 Colebrook, "On the Very Possibility of Queer Theory," 14.
- 40 Rubin, "Thinking Sex," 149. This narrative becomes especially pernicious with older gay men like Cohen. As Dustin Bradley Goltz writes, "A prevalent myth in mainstream and gay cultural discourses paints the image of the 'older' gay male as an isolated, miserable, and bitter sexual pervert" (Goltz 6).
- 41 Butler, "Contagious Word: Paranoia and 'Homosexuality' in the Military," 144.
- 42 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 39.
- 43 Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, ix.
- 44 Travinor, "Bioshock and the Art of Rapture", 91.
- 45 Munt, *Queer Attachments: The Cultural Politics of Shame*, 80.
- 46 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 19.
- 47 Bayley, "The Queer Carnival," 215.
- 48 The lack of progression or hope for Splicers is related to their (and Rapture's) existence outside of chrononormativity, which Youngblood explains in his chapter. Rather than presenting an alternative, the fallen form of the Splicers reinforces the idea that anything outside of chrononormativity is doomed to failure and has no future.
- 49 Morland and Willox, "Introduction," 4.
- 50 Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 26.
- 51 Shaw, "Putting the Gay in Games: Cultural Production and GLBT Content in Video Games," 248.
- 52 Campbell and Carilli, "Introduction," 2.
- 53 Aldred and Greenspan, "A Man Chooses, A Slave Obeys: *Bioshock* and the Dystopian Logic of Convergence," 492.
- 54 Volcano and Windh, "GenderFusion," 131.
- 55 Halberstam, "Queer Betrayals," 188.
- 56 Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 24.
- 57 Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, xiii.
- 58 Winnubst, *Queering Freedom*, 113.

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